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Baby owls doing OK

By Ramona Turner

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SANTA CRUZ -- Five baby barn owls discovered Friday are doing just fine, a rescuer said Monday.

"Their parents came to feed them," said Rebecca Dmytryk Titus, founder and project manager of WildRescue, one of the organizations that made the owls' return home possible. "We will be monitoring and checking on them to make sure the parents continue to feed them."

The five baby birds of prey were found Friday in downtown Santa Cruz inside a nest their parents built inside a body shop's metal sign. The shop's owner found the nest while he was tearing down the sign, which was damaged during a recent storm. Concerned about the animals' well-being, the owner called the animal rescuers.

While the baby owls were being cared for by humans, a nesting box was built and secured to the post that once held up the body shop sign. Representatives from WildRescue and Native Animal Rescue then carefully placed the owls in the nesting box.

The location of the nest box is a secret, as Dmytryk Titus fears human interference with the owl family.

Rescuers also placed an orphan from the Peninsula Humane Society in San Mateo County "so that it, too, could be raised by wild parents," Dmytryk Titus said.

Reuniting and fostering healthy orphaned babies is becoming more common among professional wildlife rehabilitation workers, she added.

"The best caregiver is the animal's wild parent, not a human," Dmytryk Titus said.

It is not rare for barn owls to be found in urban settings. They typically nest in places such as tree hollows, caves, barns and signs. They grow to be about 40 centimeters and can weigh up to 15.5 ounces.

The nocturnal birds dine on rodents and are becoming increasingly popular guests for people who are building and supporting owl habitats in the hopes that they will naturally control the pests, Dmytryk Titus said. Barn owls are known to consume twice as much in prey than other owls, as a maturing baby barn owl may consume the equivalent of a dozen mice in one night, she said.

Brown and white in color, the barn owl does not hoot. Rather, it screeches and hisses like a snake. And when cornered or captured, it defends itself by throwing itself on its back and flailing with its sharp-taloned feet.

The baby owls in Santa Cruz are expected to feed and grow in the box nest for the next few weeks, said Dmytryk Titus. Once the owl family moves out, the nest box will be removed so the auto shop can replace its sign, she said.

If the shop owner would like, WildRescue will move the box elsewhere on the property, as the owls could nest there up to three times in the year, she said.

Baby owls

WildRescue posted video of the baby owl placement and parent interaction at http://youtube.com/watch?v=qoEzCuNdFzY&feature=channel_page

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